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Soviet Interest in Bilateral Discussion of Regional Conflicts

Summary

By calling for renewed discussion of regional conflicts in the runup to a possible summit meeting, Moscow hopes to gain leverage in the arms talks, create more favorable conditions for consolidating its embattled Marxist dependencies, and draw Washington into discussion of proposals which, if implemented, would tend to erode US power projection capabilities and political influence in the Third World. The Soviets do not think that the core regional struggles in Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan, and Cambodia can be resolved through talks with Washington, nor do they seek this. They may think that sufficient cooperation is possible on peripheral issues to present the appearance of some stabilization of Soviet-American relations in the Third World, with possible payoffs in the Third World and--more directly--in the arms talks. [redacted]

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At a point in time when its highest priority is domestic economic revitalization, which it hopes to protect through arms control negotiations and regeneration of an atmosphere of "detente," Moscow is confronted by a US administration it perceives to be bent on undermining its gains in the Third World, challenging the very existence of its Marxist client regimes, expanding US military activity and security ties overseas, and capitalizing on US economic leverage to reduce opportunities for further Soviet gains. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Office of Soviet Analysis [redacted] at the request of the National Security Council. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Third World Activities Division, SOVA [redacted]

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In this context, as one of several parallel initiatives aimed at shaping the US/USSR dialogue in the runup to a possible second summit meeting later this year, the Soviets have proposed opening a new phase of discussion of regional conflicts. The Soviet proposal foresees initial talks on a "conceptual" as well as practical plane (now under discussion for late August between Under Secretary of State Armacost and a delegation consisting of Deputy Foreign Minister for African affairs Anatoliy Adamishin, Chief of the First Latin American Department of the MFA (Central America) Vladimir Kazimirov, and Chief of the Near East and North Africa Countries Department Vladimir Polyakov), which will then be reviewed by the respective foreign ministers--looking toward a selection of topics they might discuss that could lead to positive decisions at the summit meeting. What the Soviets are up to is still unclear, but a question-and-answer format may help us bound some of the uncertainties. [REDACTED]

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Question. Are the Soviets interested in the substance as opposed to the appearance of the regional conflict talks?

Answer. Not necessarily. Circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that the Soviets view the regional conflict talks as only one among a set of other talks which, taken together, constitute a process of engaging Washington in the pre-summit period. This treatment of the talks was clearly implied in Gorbachev's 11 June letter to the President. Since then there has been a meeting of the Bilateral Review Commission (22 July), an SCC meeting (22-30 July), a Nuclear Experts Testing Talks meeting (25-31 July), the Nitze-Karpov bilateral discussion of strategic arms control issues and summit preparations (11-12 August), and a second meeting of the Bilateral Review Commission (13 August). Further meetings of the Nuclear Testing Experts Talks and of Nitze-Karpov have been scheduled for 4 September and 5-6 September, respectively. The common elements in all of these talks held so far have been (1) representation on the Soviet side by mid-level officials not vested with policymaking authority and (2) lack of substance to the discussions. The latter would suggest a concern with form rather than issues per se, unless, of course, the Soviets do not yet have their act in order. In either case, the rather low level of Soviet representation scheduled for the proposed regional conflict talks is certainly a sign that the pattern already established may repeat itself. The Soviet delegation to the talks may, of course, be tasked only with probing US positions, in preparation for later higher-level demarches. The intrinsic significance attributed by the Soviets to the regional conflict issue will be reflected not only--and perhaps not so much--by how seriously Moscow deals with the US on the problem in the summit context, but by the effort it makes to

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leak and propagandize Soviet positions and attack US "negativism," and to develop associated active measures campaigns targeted at US allies and the Third World audience. How much the Soviets will be able to use the talks to play to the gallery, and how much impact this will have remain to be seen. []

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Question. To what extent has the proposal in fact been advanced to achieve exogeneous, non-regional objectives?

Answer. The key area the Soviets would see potentially affected by a discussion of regional conflicts would be the arms talks specifically, and the bilateral atmosphere more generally. Sensitized by years of US linkage of arms negotiations and Soviet regional behavior, Gorbachev's advisers may well have convinced him to seize the initiative here and demonstrate "reasonableness" to the "sober-minded" elements in Congress and among our allies seen by Moscow to be urging flexibility in the arms talks on the US administration. []

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Question. Do the Soviets need a dampening of regional conflicts?

Answer. To some extent this would be desirable, although not essential. While some Soviets stress the prospects for exploiting Third World tensions in the near term, the dominant view appears to be that on balance--at least now--US influence can best be eroded by conveying an appearance of normalization of East/West relations in the Third World. Soviet arms deliveries and even economic assistance for selected embattled clients (e.g., Nicaragua) have not suggested any desire to abandon the policy of consolidating the "socialist-oriented" regimes, much less any strong economic compulsion to reach agreement with the United States over regional conflicts. Nevertheless, Soviet behavior does indicate a desire at the margin to contain the costs of client support. Conceivably Gorbachev could also use the appearance of progress in talking with the Reagan administration about regional conflicts as an argument internally for (a) flexibility in arms negotiations with Washington and (b) lowering the threat assessment of the "imperialist danger" employed to justify current rates of military spending. []

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Question. Do the Soviets think there are prospects for resolving regional conflicts through negotiations with Washington?

Answer. Almost certainly not, as far as the core struggles in Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan, and Cambodia are concerned. But they might see the talks as a means of smoking out US intentions. If they had not decided so already, the experience of almost two completed rounds of regional talks must have convinced Soviet leaders that a meeting of minds with the Reagan administration on these conflicts was highly unlikely. Despite reporting of talk by individual Soviet officials of "trading" that would preserve existing spheres of influence (e.g., Nicaragua for Afghanistan) it is highly doubtful that the Soviets believe the US could or would agree to such transactions. Nor would the Soviets want to actually go through with anything of the sort either, unless they were convinced they were losing their client anyway. However, Moscow might believe that certain limited mutual accommodations are possible which could reduce Soviet risks and advance Soviet interests in regions--such as the Yemens, Iran-Iraq, the Levant, or East Asia and the Pacific--where the confrontation between the United States and the USSR has not been joined so directly. [redacted]

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Question. Does Moscow believe it can constrain the US administration's regional policies through initiating a new dialogue on regional conflicts?

Answer. Probably to some extent. The Soviets may hope that a show of willingness to "negotiate" regional conflicts will help build pressure against the "Reagan Doctrine" among congressional opponents of US support for various anti-Communist insurgencies and among US allies. By the same token, the Soviets may hope to establish the appearance of "linkage" of their own between the achievement of arms control steps highly valued by many in the West and US restraint toward Soviet Third World allies, thus generating a further incentive to pressure the administration to hold back. [redacted]

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Question. Do the Soviets believe that establishing a new dialogue with Washington over regional conflicts could directly advance their interests in the Third World?

Answer. Almost certainly yes, although how much so is open to question. The Soviets probably calculate that it would be difficult for Washington to counter the perception that the United States was negotiating the fate of its clients over their heads with Moscow, fanning fears among insurgents and their supporters of lack of US resolve and an American sellout. Naturally, the Soviets have analogous problems with their

clients, but they probably perceive the liabilities here to be heavier for the United States. The Soviets may also see the dialogue on regional conflicts as a useful forum in which to engage Washington in a discussion of general or regionally-specific principles of "restraint"--especially of a military character--that would in practice disproportionately affect US freedom of maneuver and would perhaps have considerable resonance among Third World audiences. []

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Question. Are we likely to see the "new look" in diplomatic style as the Soviets approach the dialogue on regional issues?

Answer. Probably yes; partly because Gorbachev's advisers may indeed have a lighter touch than Gromyko, but more because it is in the Soviet interest to keep the process going if possible and, if not, not to be seen as torpedoing it. Thus, the Soviets are not likely to lead with ringing denunciations of US "neoglobalism" and "state terrorism." Rather, they are likely--while displaying firmness on substance--to avoid excessive abuse, show "statesmanship," and condemn the United States more in sorrow than in anger. Given the very limited hopes that they probably have of actually negotiating with their interlocutors on the one hand, and the audiences they do hope to reach on the other, public diplomacy is highly likely to be the name of their game if their interest in the talks is more than purely formal. []

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Question. Does the Soviet highlighting of discussion on a "conceptual" plane imply an agenda that finesses concrete regional issues in favor of discussion of broad declaratory "principles"?

Answer. No. We are likely to see a Soviet agenda that combines country specifics and more general issues of either a regional or global nature. The specialist composition of the Soviet delegation for the August 25th talks clearly suggests that the Soviets do not intend to evade country discussions and might take the initiative here--defining the issues very differently than we do. Our side might well be confronted with a set of no-win proposals dealing, for example, with:

- The South African menace to international security.
- "Interventionism" in Central America.
- The Pakistani nuclear program.

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-- Political settlement of the Afghan war and outside "intervention."

-- The Arab-Israeli conflict.

The absence of a South Asian specialist on the Soviet side does raise a question mark, however, as to how actively the Soviets will pursue Afghan and Pakistani issues. Previously Polyakov has refused to discuss Afghanistan as being beyond his sphere of competence. [redacted]

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The Soviets could confine themselves to rehashing old positions already expressed in the first two rounds of bilateral regional talks. Or, they could build on the few areas of agreement that have emerged in these discussions--ending the Iran-Iraq war, curbing Iranian terrorism, and opposing the use of chemical warfare in the Middle East. These gambits would indicate an intention either of demonstrating "toughness" to an internal Soviet audience suspicious of Gorbachev's resolve, or of minimizing attention to regional issues at the summit. But these courses of action would appear unlikely, given the Soviet initiative to hold the talks, the reference to "conceptual" discussions, and--provided there is more than formal interest in holding the talks--the probable intent of addressing audiences outside the conference room. [redacted]

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The most likely alternative would probably be an attempt to engage the United States in a discussion of ideas that Gorbachev has floated at the Party Congress under the rubric of a "comprehensive system of international security," in his speech of 26 March to an Algerian delegation, and recently in his 28 July speech in Vladivostok--all of which apply to one or more regions. The agenda here might include:

- Joint sponsorship of regional CDE-type security conferences (Mediterranean and Pacific Ocean conferences have already been mentioned).
- Regional mutual security pacts.
- Nuclear-free zones.
- Regional confidence-building measures.
- Reductions of military forces and closure of military facilities (e.g., US bases in the Philippines, possibly with some clarification of a Soviet quid pro quo).

- Constraints on naval operations (the Mediterranean, South Pacific and Indian Ocean have been mentioned), including antisubmarine warfare.
- Economic cooperation (especially in the Pacific region). [redacted]

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In addition, the Soviets might also raise questions of a more global character. Possible items here would include:

- International economic issues, including the debt crisis, posed so as to constrain Western economic leverage against the USSR (a world congress on "problems of international economic security" has already been proposed).
- Terrorism, with a narrow focus on actions to which the Soviets might feel especially vulnerable.
- Natural resources and pollution.
- Scientific and technical cooperation.
- Control of export of chemical warfare materials.
- Drug trafficking.

Building on earlier efforts of Brezhnev to promote a "code of conduct," the Soviets might also see some advantage in attempting to draw Washington into a discussion of "principles" of international behavior that could be used to counter the Reagan administration's activism and assert the USSR's claim to recognition by the United States as a legitimate superpower actor in the Third World. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: Soviet Interest in Bilateral Discussion of
Regional Conflicts

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